

A BRAVE LITTLE QUAKERESS. A TRADITION OF THE REVOLUT

E. P. Roe

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Not very far from the Highlands of the Hudson, but at a considerable distance from the river, there stood, one hundred years ago, a farmhouse that evidently had been built as much for strength and defence as for comfort. The dwelling was one story and a half in height, and was constructed of hewn logs, fitted closely together, and made impervious to the weather by old-fashioned mortar, which seems to defy the action of time. Two entrances facing each other led to the main or living room, and they were so large that a horse could pass through them, dragging in immense back-logs. These, having been detached from a chain when in the proper position, were rolled into the huge fireplace that yawned like a sooty cavern at the farther end of the apartment. A modern housekeeper, who finds wood too dear an article for even the air-tight stove, would be appalled by this fireplace. Stalwart Mr. Reynolds, the master of the house, could easily walk under its stony arch without removing his broad-brimmed Quaker hat. From the left side, and at a convenient height from the hearth, a massive crane swung in and out; while high above the centre of the fire was an iron hook, or trammel, from which by chains were suspended the capacious iron pots used in those days for culinary or for stock-feeding purposes. This trammel, which hitherto had suggested only good cheer, was destined to have in coming years a terrible significance to the household.

When the blaze was moderate, or the bed of live coals not too ample, the children could sit on either side of the fireplace and watch the stars through its wide flue; and this was a favorite amusement of Phebe Reynolds, the eldest daughter of the house.

A door opened from the living-room into the other apartments, furnished in the old massive style that outlasts many generations. All the windows were protected by stout oaken shutters which, when closed, almost transformed the dwelling into a fortress, giving security against any ordinary attack. There were no loopholes in the walls through which the muzzle of the deadly rifle could be thrust and fired from within. This feature, so common in the primitive abodes of the country, was not in accordance with John Reynolds's Quaker principles. While indisposed to fight, it was evident that the good man intended to interpose between himself and his enemies all the passive resistance that his stout little domicile could offer.

And he knew that he had enemies of the bitterest and most unscrupulous character. He was a staunch Whig, loyal to the American cause, and, above all, resolute and active in the maintenance of law and order in those lawless times. He thus had made himself obnoxious to his Tory neighbors, and an object of hate and fear to a gang of marauders, who, under the pretence of acting with the British forces, plundered the country far and near. Claudius Smith, the Robin Hood of the Highlands and the terror of the pastoral low country, had formerly been their leader; and the sympathy shown by Mr. Reynolds with all the efforts to bring him to justice which finally resulted in his capture and execution, and awakened among his former associates an intense desire for revenge. This fact, well known to the farmer, kept him constantly on his guard, and filled his wife and daughter Phebe with deep apprehension.

At the time of our story, Phebe was only twelve years of age, but was mature beyond her years. There were several younger children, and she had become almost womanly in aiding her mother in their care. Her stout,

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plump little body had been developed rather than enfeebled by early toil, and a pair of resolute and often mirthful blue eyes bespoke a spirit not easily daunted. She was a native growth of the period, vitalized by pure air and out-of-door pursuits, and she abounded in the shrewd intelligence and demure refinement of her sect to a degree that led some of their neighbors to speak of her as "a little old woman." When alone with the children, however, or in the woods and fields, she would doff her Quaker primness, and romp, climb trees, and frolic with the wildest.

But of late, the troublous times and her father's peril had brought unwonted thoughtfulness into her blue eyes, and more than Quaker gravity to the fresh young face, which, in spite of exposure to sun and wind, maintained much of its inherited fairness of complexion. Of her own accord she was becoming a vigilant sentinel, for a rumor had reached Mr. Reynolds that sooner or later he would have a visit from the dreaded mountain gang of hard riders. Two roads leading to the hills converged on the main highway not far from his dwelling; and from an adjacent knoll Phebe often watched this place, while her father, with a lad in his employ, completed their work about the barn. When the shadows deepened, all was made as secure as possible without and within, and the sturdy farmer, after committing himself and his household to the Divine protection, slept as only brave men sleep who are clear in conscience and accustomed to danger.

His faith was undoubtedly rewarded; but Providence in the execution of its will loves to use vigilant human eyes and ready, loving hands. The guardian angel destined to protect the good man was his blooming daughter Phebe, who had never thought of herself as an angel, and indeed rarely thought of herself at all, as is usually the case with those who do most to sweeten and brighten the world. She was a natural, wholesome, human child, with all a child's unconsciousness of self. She knew she could not protect her father like a great stalwart son, but she could watch and warn him of danger, and as the sequel proved, she could do far more.

The farmer's habits were well known, and the ruffians of the mountains were aware that after he had shut himself in he was much like Noah in his ark. If they attempted to burn him out, the flames would bring down upon them a score of neighbors not hampered by Quaker principles. Therefore they resolved upon a sudden onslaught before he had finished the evening labors of the farm. This was what the farmer feared; and Phebe, like a vigilant outpost, was now never absent from her place of observation until called in.

One spring evening she saw two mounted men descending one of the roads which led from the mountains. Instead of jogging quietly out on the highway, as ordinary travellers would have done, they disappeared among the trees. Soon afterward she caught a glimpse of two other horsemen on the second mountain road. One of these soon came into full view, and looked up and down as if to see that all was clear. Apparently satisfied, he gave a low whistle, when three men joined him. Phebe waited to see no more, but sped toward the house, her flaxen curls flying from her flushed and excited face.

"They are coming, father! Thee must be quick!" she cried.

But a moment or two elapsed before all were within the dwelling, the doors banged and barred, the heavy shutters closed, and the home-fortress made secure. Phebe's warning had come none too soon, for they had scarcely time to take breath before the tramp of galloping horses and the oaths of their baffled foes were heard without. The marauders did not dare make much noise, for fear that some passing neighbor might give the alarm. Tying their horses behind the house, where they would be hidden from the road, they tried various expedients to gain an entrance, but the logs and heavy planks baffled them. At last one of the number suggested that they should ascend the roof and climb down the wide flue of the chimney. This plan was easy of execution, and for a few moments the stout farmer thought that his hour had come. With a heroism far beyond that of the man who strikes down his assailant, he prepared to suffer all things rather than take life with his own hands.

But his wife proved equal to this emergency. She had been making over a bed, and a large basket of feathers was within reach. There were live coals on the hearth, but they did not give out enough heat to prevent the ruffians

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from descending. Two of them were already in the chimney, and were threatening horrible vengeance if the least resistance was offered. Upon the coals on the hearth the housewife instantly emptied her basket of feathers; and a great volume of pungent, stifling smoke poured up the chimney. The threats of the men, who by means of ropes were cautiously descending, were transformed into choking, half-suffocated sounds, and it was soon evident that the intruders were scrambling out as fast as possible. A hurried consultation on the roof ensued, and then, as if something had alarmed them, they galloped off. With the exception of the cries of the peepers, or hylas, in an adjacent swamp, the night soon grew quiet around the closed and darkened dwelling. Farmer Reynolds bowed in thanksgiving over their escape, and then after watching a few hours, slept as did thousands of others in those times of anxiety.

But Phebe did not sleep. She grew old by moments that night as do other girls by months and years; as never before she understood that her father's life was in peril. How much that life meant to her and the little brood of which she was the eldest! How much it meant to her dear mother, who was soon again to give birth to a little one that would need a father's protection and support! As the young girl lay in her little attic room, with dilated eyes and ears intent on the slightest sound, she was ready for any heroic self-sacrifice, without once dreaming that she was heroic.

The news of the night-attack spread fast, and there was a period of increased vigilance which compelled the outlaws to lie close in their mountain fastnesses. But Phebe knew that her father's enemies were still at large with their hate only stimulated because baffled for a time. Therefore she did not in the least relax her watchfulness; and she besought their nearest neighbors to come to their assistance should any alarm be given.

When the spring and early summer passed without further trouble, they all began to breathe more freely, but one July night John Reynolds was betrayed by his patriotic impulses. He was awakened by a loud knocking at his door. Full of misgiving, he rose and hastily dressed himself: Phebe, who had slipped on her clothes at the first alarm, joined him and said earnestly:

"Don't thee open the door, father, to anybody, at this time of night;" and his wife, now lying ill and helpless on a bed in the adjoining room, added her entreaty to that of her daughter. In answer, however, to Mr. Reynolds's inquiries a voice from without, speaking quietly and seemingly with authority, asserted that they were a squad from Washington's forces in search of deserters, and that no harm would ensue unless he denied their lawful request. Conscious of innocence, and aware that detachments were often abroad on such authorized quests, Mr. Reynolds unbarred his door. The moment he opened it he saw his terrible error; not soldiers, but the members of the mountain gang, were crouched like wild beasts ready to spring upon him.

"Fly, father!" cried Phebe. "They won't hurt us;" but before the bewildered man could think what to do, the door flew open from the pressure of half a dozen wild-looking desperadoes, and he was powerless in their grasp. They evidently designed murder, but not a quick and merciful "taking off"; they first heaped upon their victim the vilest epithets, seeking in their thirst for revenge to inflict all the terrors of death in anticipation. The good man, however, now face to face with his fate, grew calm and resigned. Exasperated by his courage, they began to cut and torture him with their swords and knives. Phebe rushed forward to interpose her little form between her father and the ruffians, and was dashed, half stunned, into a corner of the room. Even for the sake of his sick wife, the brave farmer could not refrain from uttering groans of anguish which brought the poor woman with faltering steps into his presence. After one glance at the awful scene she sank, half fainting, on a settee near the door.

When the desire for plunder got the better of their fiendish cruelty, one of the gang threw a noosed rope over Mr. Reynolds's head, and then they hanged him to the trammel or iron hook in the great chimney.

"You can't smoke us out this time," they shouted. "You've now got to settle with the avengers of Claudius Smith; and you and some others will find us ugly customers to settle with."

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They then rushed off to rob the house, for the farmer was reputed to have not a little money in his strong box. The moment they were gone Phebe seized a knife and cut her father down. Terror and excitement gave her almost supernatural strength, and with the aid of the boy in her father's service she got the poor man on a bed which he had occupied during his wife's illness. Her reviving mother was beginning to direct her movements when the ruffians again entered; and furious with rage, they again seized and hanged her father, while one, more brutal than the others, whipped the poor child with a heavy rope until he thought she was disabled. The girl at first cowered and shivered under the blows, and then sank as if lifeless on the floor. But the moment she was left to herself she darted forward and once more cut her father down. The robbers then flew upon the prostrate man and cut and stabbed him until they supposed he was dead. Toward his family they meditated a more terrible and devilish cruelty. After sacking the house and taking all the plunder they could carry, they relieved the horror-stricken wife and crying, shrieking children of their presence. Their further action, however, soon inspired Phebe with a new and more awful fear, for she found that they had fastened the doors on the outside and were building a fire against one of them.

For a moment an overpowering despair at the prospect of their fate almost paralyzed her. She believed her father was dead. The boy who had aided her at first was now dazed and helpless from terror. If aught could be done in this supreme moment of peril she saw that it must be done by her hands. The smoke from the kindling fire without was already curling in through the crevices around the door. There was not a moment, not a second to be lost. The ruffians' voices were growing fainter and she heard the sounds of their horses' feet. Would they go away in time for her to extinguish the fire? She ran to her attic room and cautiously opened the shutter. Yes, they were mounting; and in the faint light of the late-rising moon she saw that they were taking her father's horses. A moment later, as if fearing that the blaze might cause immediate pursuit, they dashed off toward the mountains.

The clatter of their horses' hoofs had not died away before the intrepid girl had opened the shutter of a window nearest the ground, and springing lightly out with a pail in her hand she rushed to the trough near the barn, which she knew was full of water. Back and forth she flew between the fire and the convenient reservoir with all the water that her bruised arms and back permitted her to carry. Fortunately the night was a little damp, and the stout thick door had kindled slowly. To her intense joy she soon gained the mastery of the flames, and at last extinguished them.

She did not dare to open the door for fear that the robbers might return, but clambering in at the window, made all secure as had been customary, for now it was her impulse to do just as her father would have done.

She found her mother on her knees beside her father, who would indeed have been a ghastly and awful object to all but the eyes of love.

"Oh, Phebe, I hope I almost believe thy father lives!" cried the woman. "Is it my throbbing palm, or does his heart still beat?"

"I'm sure it beats, mother!" cried the girl, putting her little hand on the gashed and mangled body.

"Oh, then there's hope! Here, Abner," to the boy, "isn't there any man in thee? Help Phebe get him on the bed, and then we must stop this awful bleeding. Oh, that I were well and strong! Phebe, thee must now take my place. Thee may save thy father's life. I can tell thee what to do if thee has the courage."

Phebe had the courage and with deft hands did her mother's bidding. She stanch'd the many gaping wounds; she gave spirits at first drop by drop, until at last the man breathed and was conscious. Even before the dawn began to brighten over the dreaded Highlands which their ruthless enemies were already climbing, Phebe was flying, bare-headed, across the fields to their nearest neighbor. The good people heard of the outrage with horror and indignation. A half-grown lad sprang on the bare back of a young horse and galloped across the country for a surgeon. A few moments later the farmer, equipped for chase and battle, dashed away at headlong pace to alarm

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the neighborhood. The news sped from house to house and hamlet to hamlet like fire in prairie grass. The sun had scarcely risen before a dozen bronzed and stern-browed men were riding into John Reynolds's farm-yard under the lead of young Hal June the best shot that the wars had left in the region. The surgeon had already arrived, and before he ceased from his labors he had dressed thirty wounds.

The story told by Phebe had been as brief as it was terrible for she was eager to return to her father and sick mother. She had not dreamed of herself as the heroine of the affair, and had not given any such impression, although more than one had remarked that she was "a plucky little chick to give the alarm before it was light." But when the proud mother faintly and tearfully related the particulars of the tragedy, and told how Phebe had saved her father's life and probably her mother's for, "I was too sick to climb out of a window," she said; when she told how the child after a merciless whipping had again cut her father down from the trammel-hook, had extinguished the fire, and had been nursing her father back to life, while all the time in almost agony herself from the cruel blows that had been rained upon her Phebe was dazed and bewildered at the storm of applause that greeted her. And when the surgeon, in order to intensify the general desire for vengeance, showed the great welts and scars on her arms and neck, gray-bearded fathers who had known her from infancy took her into their arms and blessed and kissed her. For once in his life young Hal June wished he was a gray-beard, but his course was much more to the mind of Phebe than any number of caresses would have been. Springing on his great black horse, and with his dark eyes burning with a fire that only blood could quench, he shouted:

"Come, neighbors, it's time for deeds. That brave little woman ought to make a man of every mother's son of us;" and he dashed away so furiously that Phebe thought with a strange little tremor at her heart that he might in his speed face the robbers all alone. The stout yeomen clattered after him; the sound of their pursuit soon died away; and Phebe returned to woman's work of nursing, watching, and praying.

The bandits of the hills, not expecting such prompt retaliation, were overtaken, and then followed a headlong race over the rough mountain roads guilty wretches flying for life, and stern men almost reckless in the burning desire to avenge a terrible wrong. Although the horses of the marauders were tired, their riders were so well acquainted with the fastnesses of the wilderness that they led the pursuers through exceedingly difficult and dangerous paths. At last, June ever in the van, caught sight of a man's form, and almost instantly his rifle awoke a hundred echoes among the hills. When they reached the place, stains of blood marked the ground, proving that at least a wound had been given. Just beyond, the gang evidently had dispersed, each one for himself, leaving behind everything that impeded their progress. The region was almost impenetrable in its wildness except by those who knew all its rugged paths. The body of the man whom June had wounded, however, was found, clothed in a suit of Quaker drab stolen from Mr. Reynolds. The rest of the band with few exceptions met with fates that accorded with their deeds.

Phebe had the happiness of nursing her father back to health, and although maimed and disfigured, he lived to a ripe old age. If the bud is the promise of the flower, Phebe must have developed a womanhood that was regal in its worth; at the same time I believe that she always remained a modest, demure little Quakeress, and never thought of her virtues except when reminded of them in plain English.

NOTE In the preceding narrative I have followed almost literally a family tradition of events which actually occurred.

THE END